The Foolishness of Materialism
Psalm 49
Robert C. Newman
Materialism

• Materialism (or perhaps better, practical materialism) is the belief that one’s main goal in life is to accumulate enough wealth and power to live pleasantly.

• It is a very widespread belief, probably the most popular religion at all times throughout history, and not just among the rich.

• This view is seriously flawed, as we shall see in Psalm 49.

• First we give a translation, then we come back to unpack the psalm.
Introduction (vv 1-4)

1 Hear this, all you people! 
Listen, all inhabitants of the world!

2 Both commoners and nobles, 
Rich and poor together.

3 My mouth will speak wisdom, 
The meditation of my heart will be understanding.

4 I will turn my ear toward a parable; 
I will explain my riddle on the harp.
The Problem (5-6):
Materialism

5 Why should I fear in days of adversity,
   When the iniquity of my enemies surrounds me?
6 Those who trust in their power
   And boast in the greatness of their wealth?
The Real Situation (7-20)

7  Surely no one can ransom his brother,
   Nor give God his redemption.

8  For the redemption of his soul is costly,
   That it should ever be paid in full,

9  That he should live forever,
   Not to see the grave.
The Real Situation (7-20)

10 Indeed, even he sees that wise men die,
    The fool and the brute perish together,
    And they leave their wealth to others.

11 Their thought is that their houses last forever,
    And their dwelling is from generation to generation.
    They name their lands after themselves.

12 But man in his splendor will not remain
    He is like the beasts which perish.
The Real Situation (7-20)

13 This is their foolish way;
   Yet those who come after them approve their words.

14 Like sheep they are appointed for the grave;
   Death will be their shepherd.
   In the morning the upright will subdue them.

15 But God will redeem my soul;
   Indeed, He will rescue me from the power of the grave.
16 Do not be afraid when someone becomes rich, 
    When the glory of his house increases. 
17 For in his death he will take nothing with him; 
    His glory will not descend with him. 
18 Though he used to congratulate himself while he lived 
    n And men will praise you when you do well for yourself n
The Real Situation (7-20)

19 Yet he will go down to the generation of his fathers;
   He will never again see the light.

20 Man in his splendor, but without understanding,
   Is like the beasts that perish.
Introduction (1-4)

• This psalm is for everyone, rich & poor, common & elite. (1-2)
• Its message gives insight (and comes from God). (3)
• Yet it is not commonly understood, but is to most people like a riddle or parable. (4)
The Problem (5-6)

• The problem is that most people believe in practical materialism, and so tend to live that way.

• We are all easily influenced in our attitudes & actions by social pressure:
  – So the poor fear oppression by the wealthy & powerful (5-6).
  – The rich trust in their wealth & power to get through life (6).
The Problem (5-6)

• This is not a new problem in our so-called modern materialistic culture.
• It has been a dominant force throughout history, from the earliest times.
• Attempts to solve this by means of social legislation in recent centuries have not really worked.
• People are still materialists.
The Real Situation (7-20)

• No one is wealthy (or powerful) enough to buy back his life from God. (7-9)
  – Is 8b referring to an installment purchase?
• Instead everyone dies (wise & foolish, rich & poor), and they don’t take it with them. (10, 17)
• Not even the wealth left behind will stay in the family to memorialize the person. (11-12)
The Real Situation (7-20)

• As foolish as practical materialism is (11, 13, 18), it is considered praiseworthy & wise by most people.
• Yet the grave will end such glory (12, 20, 14, 17, 19)
  – They will never again see prosperity. (19)
  – The upright will dominate beyond the grave. (14)
The Solution (15-16)

• 15 But God will redeem my soul;
  – Indeed, He will rescue me from the power of the grave.

• 16 Do not be afraid when someone becomes rich,
  – When the glory of his house increases.

• Don’t trust in wealth or political power.
  – (implied throughout)
The Solution (15-16)

• Don’t be afraid of wealth or political power wielded by your enemies. (16)
• Trust & fear God:
  – He alone can buy back your life. (15)
• 12 But man in his splendor will not remain
  – He is like the beasts which perish.
• 20 Man in his splendor, but without understanding,
  – Is like the beasts that perish.
The End

May you abandon materialism in your life!